

Hope in Anxious Times  
Luke 21:25-36

*(Preached December 1, 2024)*

Does today seem like a strange day to you? To me, it is the strangest day of the church year. Why? Because while Santa is visiting Yankee Candle and the sanctuary is filled with Christmas decorations, the mood of the day is decidedly not merry. The world may be singing “Have yourself a merry little Christmas,” but the song of the church is “O Come, O Come Emanuel”.

So what is going on? This is Advent; the season of preparation, the season of truth, the season of hope. The word ‘advent’ means ‘coming.’ The coming of Christ at Christmas, yes, but more significantly the coming of God into the world.

So, what does this season of preparing for God’s coming have to do with us? The menacing, world-wrenching vision of the coming of Christ which we acknowledge every year on this day, at first seems at odds with the sweet and gentle baby Jesus. “The heavens being shaken” seems worlds away from the vision of tender Mary and humble Joseph huddled in the stable. “The roaring of the sea and the waves” seems light years away from our culture’s cheerful decorations of Santa and deep piles of presents under a gaily lit tree.

But, in fact, the hope of the prophets and the warning of Jesus have everything to do with our preparation for Christmas. Jesus warns of signs in the sun and moon and stars. It is safer for us to put that image way into the murky horizons of the future- the end days; but in the past few years we have experienced several portents and signs in heaven and on earth that seem to be warning us of the coming of the end of the world as we know it. We experience the ominous effects of global warming. And although we may have been enjoying moderate temperatures these past few weeks, we are faced with disasters like massive storms in the southeast, and major droughts and wildfires in the west, to put it in perspective. Add to that the grim reality, wars and violence in Ukraine, Gaza, and the Sudan, as well as Sandy Hook and Uvalde, and even closer to home; and we find a deep moaning of fear and sadness in the pit of our stomachs. And then the words of Jesus come alive in our midst, “people will faint from fear and foreboding.”

And if we are really truthful with one another, we have to confess just how often we find ourselves worrying. The future worries us, our families worry us, our health worries us, all the threats around us worry us. The state of the world, the moral decline and divisive spirit in local and national politics worries us. And yes, although we may try to put on a brave face- even our church worries us.

We indeed live with a great deal of anxiety in our hearts. But to that worry, to that anxiety, to that overwhelming fear, Jesus says, “look up and raise your heads, your redemption is coming near.” The good news in our Gospel today is that, despite the fact that we live in anxious times, in spite of the fact that the signs all point to the end of life as we know it, Jesus Christ tells us that we can live with courage and hope, because all is not lost - our redemption is coming.

Jesus is the promise of God, our redemption. And he is coming near to us even now, even in these times. When things look most frightening, says our Lord, is when our lives are closest to God, and God is doing a new thing. The gospel challenges us, during this Advent season, to be people of true hope, to live as people who expect God to be near, and to trust that God is doing something new and good in our lives. We are to live as if we expect that Christ is indeed coming, and is already here.

What does that mean to our daily lives? It means we can see the worries in our lives as possibilities; that the troubles around us are the labor pains of new life. In spite of heaven being shaken and the roaring of the sea, when our world is in turmoil, we can look up with confidence and trust the power of the One who stills the storms of chaos and walks on the waters of trouble. With the promise of God as our hope we can look anew on the people and situations that worry us as doorways to God's near and living presence. We can look at the dark skies and the dark places as moments to seek God's creative restoration.

As we journey through this Advent season, as we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ Jesus in a new way, let us see and know that God wants to transform and make new even the most impossible situations in our lives. Let us look and see Christ Jesus in our midst, in our troubled relationships and challenging situations, and in all those things that cause us heartache and pain and worry. Let us invite God into those place and spaces with a watchful faith and with hopeful prayer, just as Jesus directs us.

And as God draws near, we will be given the strength and wisdom to see things in a new way, with hope that will raise up our heads. We will find the promise that the world as we know it will pass away, and all things will indeed be made new. And then we will sing with hope "O Come, O Come Emanuel." Amen.

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